

Water officials eye plan to clean Loma Alta Creek

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OCEANSIDE — Each summer the waters of the Loma Alta Creek's estuary near Buccaneer Beach in Oceanside turn green with algae, fed by pollution from urban runoff.

For more than two decades, the city has been trying to solve the problem — using ultraviolet rays to zap bacteria, building a pipeline to carry the runoff out to sea and studying the sources of pollution — but the mess persists.

State water quality officials will soon start monitoring the city's fight, saying the area needs to meet clean water standards within eight years.

"We know the problem exists and we do know it needs to be resolved," said Barry Pulver, a senior environmental scientist with the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The board is expected to vote next month on a plan — officially known as an investigative order — that would set limits on the amount of pollutants allowed in the water.

The Loma Alta Creek is the natural drainage of about 6,400 acres of heavily urbanized land that runs along Oceanside Boulevard, including residential, commercial and industrial uses. Its waters feed into the Loma Alta Slough, or estuary, which is the final 1,600 feet of the watershed before it reaches the ocean.

The estuary is home to about 100 species of wildlife, including some endangered or threatened species, such as the California gnatcatcher.

Pollution in the estuary is most prominent during the region's dry season, from May through October.

Officials say that during the summer, phosphorous from pollutants such as fertilizer and pet fecal waste, collects in the estuary leading to excessive algal growth. The bacterial laden water is trapped in the estuary by a sandbar.

Heavy rains can sometimes push that water over the sandbar and into the ocean, prompting beach closures.

To reduce the number of closures, the city installed a pipeline in 1992 to take the water 1.6 miles into the ocean. In 2008, Oceanside built an ultraviolet treatment facility to kill some of the bacteria in the creek. But those were only partial or temporary solutions.

Detecting and eliminating the sources of pollution remains a problem.

City and state water officials have been working together on the latest plan, which includes monitoring phosphorous levels in the estuary and requires the city to find and eliminate the sources of phosphorous in the creek.

City officials said they agree with the plan's goals but would like some flexibility in implementing it.

Mo Lahsaie, Oceanside's environmental officer, said the city is already addressing pollution in the creek, such as investigating the sources of pollution. The problem persists because some sources are difficult to detect and others are hard to eliminate, he said.

"There are some sources that we have no control over," Lahsaie said. "For example, I can't force people to pick up after their dogs. If they don't, all that dog waste will go and create bacterial problems (in the creek). I can't tell people don't fertilize your grass."

The city could consider ordinances to control some of the sources — such as fining people for not picking up after their pets, as other cities have done — but Lahsaie said "it's politically a tough subject to touch."

Other strategies the city will pursue include asking city meter readers to report irrigation runoff, studying residential runoff and educating landscape workers about runoff and proper fertilizer use, officials said.

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